Lessons in transit and pollution from London and Madrid; Former mayor David Miller's new book looks at how municipalities can take action when other levels of government are unwilling to

The Toronto Star

October 4, 2020 Sunday

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Section: INSIGHT; Pg. IN1

Length: 2021 words

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Body

London, England, is a historic city, nearly 2,000 years old. It has an excellent public transit network, but by the year 2000 the combination of its narrow streets, dense historical core and high rates of personal-vehicle use had resulted in major congestion. In addition to traffic problems, this congestion greatly affected air quality, and - of course - caused greenhouse gas emissions.

It has been estimated that thousands of London residents die every year due to air pollution, and that air pollution, including that from vehicular exhaust, is associated with increased rates of asthma, reduced lung capacity, mental health problems, dementia, strokes and other major health conditions. Children are particularly vulnerable, and in London, hundreds of schools are situated in areas that exceed legal and safe air pollution levels. This has a considerable social and economic toll on the city.

To address these mobility and public health issues, London undertook years of painstaking research and sought reports from working groups. The research conclusively showed that a charge on vehicles would dramatically reduce the traffic entering the central city - thereby reducing emissions and improving air quality. This idea - known as "congestion charging" - was introduced in 2003 by Mayor Ken Livingstone. At the time, according to the BBC, it was the "biggest congestion charge scheme ever undertaken by a capital city."

A congestion charge is a daily fee charged to vehicles that drive into or park in congestion zones during regular business hours. In London, cameras are used to capture licence plate numbers throughout the congestion zone, and charges are paid online or through an automatic-payment system. The current daily charge is £11.50 (about $20) and the zone covers central London - the area within the London inner ring road. Buses, standard taxis, service vehicles and motorcycles are exempt from congestion charging, and discounts are available for residents and persons with disabilities. Ultra-low-emissions vehicles also qualify for discounts.

Studies have shown that congestion charging reduced the number of cars entering the zone during business hours. In the first year of congestion charging, there were a third fewer cars and minicabs on the streets during business hours. It was estimated that half of the diverted trips by car were switched to trips by bus, which reinforced one of the critical actions taken by Mayor Livingstone at inception. He dramatically increased bus service at exactly the same time as the start of the congestion charge - thereby facilitating transportation choices for those affected. Taxis also saw a significant increase in ridership. And travel delays caused by congestion fell by 30 per cent.

Initially, the congestion-charge proposal was extremely unpopular. Mayor Livingstone withstood significant public challenge, including from his Conservative opponent in the 2004 election, who said that the charge wouldn't work and vowed to cancel both it and any fines for nonpayment. That stance was supported by the Conservative Party and by some sectors of the business community, who claimed that the charges would hurt business.

Tony Blair, the Labour prime minister, urged London members of the party to vote against the congestion charge. A legal challenge was brought against it by Westminster City Council on the basis that it breached the human rights of residents, would drive pollution to areas outside the zone, and cut people off from essential services. The case was unsuccessful.

The critics were wrong. The charge worked. Traffic congestion plummeted. Business was more successful, not less. And Ken Livingstone was re-elected.

The Conservatives, unfortunately from the perspective of climate action, maintained their position, and Boris Johnson, who defeated Ken Livingstone in 2008, repealed an extension of the zone and prevented rate increases. As a result, congestion has slowly increased in London, eventually reaching pre-2003 levels.

Johnson did support, however, the implementation of a low-emission zone (LEZ) to help combat air pollution from transportation sources. The zone covers most of Greater London and operates all day, every day. LEZ charges apply to older diesel heavy vehicles: transport trucks, coaches, utility vehicles and the like. Designed to incentivize better route planning, upgrades and fleet renewal, the charges are significant: £300 (about $500) per day in 2020 on top of any other congestion and emission-zone charges.

Applicable vehicles can sometimes be fitted with filters or adapted to use less-polluting fuel to avoid paying the charges, but the emissions standards were designed from inception to become stricter over time. Some businesses have reorganized their fleets to reduce deliveries and to use only new vehicles within London, and in some cases, businesses have chosen to retire their older vehicles early to avoid the charges. The result: fewer emissions from the dirtiest vehicles within Greater London.

Under the leadership of the current mayor, Sadiq Khan, London has continued its progress. To reach zero emissions, reduce pollution and alleviate gridlock, the mayor's office has developed a comprehensive transportation strategy with clear goals. By 2050, all vehicles in the city will be zero emission, including personal vehicles, taxis and buses. By 2041, 80 per cent of trips within the city will be walking, biking or public transit. Zero-emission zones, places where no fossil-fuel-powered cars are allowed, will expand from the central city to the entirety of London by 2050.

In 2019, building on the work of Mayor Livingstone and on the LEZ supported by his predecessor, Mayor Khan introduced the ultra-low-emission zone (ULEZ) - a measure explicitly designed to address air quality and climate change. The ULEZ currently shares a boundary with the congestion zone but applies at all times. The daily charge of £12.50 (about $21) applies to all emitting vehicles that enter central London and is in addition to the congestion charges.

Ultra-low-emission vehicles are exempt: fully electric vehicles, plug-in hybrids, some regular hybrids, hydrogen-fuel-cell vehicles. Discounts are also available for taxis, residents and persons with disabilities. These charges replace a series of pollution charges and discounts for greener vehicles that started as early as 2013. In 2021, the ULEZ is due to expand its coverage area to include much of Greater London.

I was in London the day of the launch. It was fascinating to see the media reporting on the concept. They had the predictable interviews with drivers who did not want to pay - but for the other side of the story, the BBC went to an elementary school in central London. It interviewed teachers, parents and students. The air quality was so bad that the school had to supply asthma inhalers to students - the broadcast showed film of the rack used to store those inhalers.

This angle to the story was not by accident - Mayor Kahn's team had done months of painstaking research and work into health and air-quality issues. The ULEZ was created as a solution to the real problem of air quality impacting the health of children and other residents, and they had ensured that the facts about the health impacts of poor air quality were well known. In this context, the launch of the zone was highly successful and the controversy limited, particularly compared to that surrounding Mayor Livingstone's original congestion charge.

London's buses are not exempt from LEZ and ULEZ charges. Although operated privately, buses are owned publicly. The city currently has a fleet of more than 200 electric buses in use in the ULEZ zone, along with more than 3,500 hybrid buses, 10 hydrogen-fuel-cell buses and new diesels that generate fewer emissions. Even the iconic double-decker buses are being replaced with hybrid, electric or hydrogen versions. Starting in 2020, all new single-deck buses will be zero emissions, and by 2037 the entire bus fleet will be zero emission.

These measures are working. In 2017, London emitted enough pollution in the first five days of the year to breach its annual air pollution limits. In 2018, it took less than a month. But in 2019, when the ULEZ was fully operational, it took seven months ...

From the perspective of climate change, when air pollution from transportation is reduced, carbon pollution also drops because the pollution comes from the same source - the burning of fossil fuels.

Although controversial and politicized at commencement, the congestion charge and the subsequent ULEZ have proven to be popular and enduring. The congestion charge - aided by significant expansion of public transport - actually lowered congestion, and the ULEZ is cleaning the heavily polluted air. London's example shows clearly that as people experience the benefits of climate action firsthand and have an opportunity to adapt, they are supportive - and, in fact, they may be just as unwilling to lose the mobility and health benefits of these actions. Madrid is an interesting example of a political backlash against both congestion fees and their removal.

MADRID

Madrid, Spain - another centuries-old European capital with serious air quality and congestion issues - introduced an LEZ in its city centre in 2018.

High-emission vehicles were banned from the affected areas, with fines of up to 90 euros (about $140) for noncompliance. Exemptions were provided for those who lived in the city centre, but eventually all vehicles driving in the zone were to be required to be low-emission. In the meantime, the city was focusing on providing better public transportation and enabling walking and cycling.

The LEZ worked. Just six months after its implementation, air-pollution levels in the affected areas were at their lowest levels since 2010. Carbon-dioxide emissions were also significantly lower.

As in London, the LEZ in Madrid was controversial at inception. Certain drivers and car owners protested bitterly. Their complaints led to a movement to abolish the fees, and in the 2019 election Jose Luis Martinez-Almeida was elected as mayor on a platform that included abolishing the LEZ. On taking office he honoured his promise. But what happened next was unexpected, certainly to the new mayor.

On June 29, 2019, during a scorching heat wave and just two days before the LEZ was to be dismantled, thousands of Madrid residents took to the streets. They used their voice to demand that the mayor reinstate the ban on polluting vehicles in the city centre.

"I want to breathe free" and "Defending the population from pollution" were some of the messages from the protesters. In addition, a petition calling for Madrid to keep its LEZ was signed by more than 220,000 people, a significant number out of the city's population of about six million. The message was clear: residents are willing to fight to preserve cleaner air and pedestrian-friendly streets.

As promised, and led by the new mayor, Madrid city centre was opened to all vehicles on July 1, 2019. Air pollution in affected areas soared according to environmental groups. But the story did not end there. The residents also fought in the courts, and on July 5, 2019, a court ordered that the LEZ be reinstated. The judge specifically ruled that "the health of Madrid" trumps "the right to travel by car."

The fight in Madrid is revealing of the challenge of bold climate action. It is easy for politicians (typically but not always right-wing) to fight actions that benefit health and our planet when the action threatens people's convenience. But people know that our health and climate-sustaining systems must take priority, and they will support strong and effective climate action.

From a transportation perspective, we individually have choices in how we get around but we also have to take collective action to ensure that our air is fit to breathe and that our greenhouse gas emissions are sustainable.

This excerpt from "Solved: How The World's Cities Are Fixing the Climate Crisis" by David Miller appears courtesy of Aevo UTP, an imprint of University of Toronto Press.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: POLLUTION (92%); POLLUTION & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS (92%); AIR POLLUTION (90%); AIR QUALITY (90%); CITY LIFE (90%); CONGESTION PRICING (90%); MEDICINE & HEALTH (90%); TRANSPORTATION & ENVIRONMENT (90%); AIR QUALITY REGULATION (89%); CITY GOVERNMENT (89%); EMISSIONS (89%); NEGATIVE NEWS (89%); VEHICLE EMISSIONS (89%); UK CONSERVATIVE PARTY (79%); UK POLITICAL PARTIES (78%); DELAYS & POSTPONEMENTS (77%); CLIMATE ACTION (76%); FINES & PENALTIES (76%); POLLUTION MONITORING, PREVENTION & REMEDIATION (76%); RESPIRATORY DISORDERS & INJURIES (76%); DEMENTIA (75%); POLITICAL PARTIES (75%); SOCIETY, SOCIAL ASSISTANCE & LIFESTYLE (75%); SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION (73%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (71%); GREENHOUSE GASES (71%); ASTHMA (70%); DISABLED PERSONS (70%); MENTAL HEALTH (70%); MENTAL ILLNESS (70%); PUBLIC HEALTH (55%)

Industry: CONGESTION PRICING (90%); TRANSPORTATION & ENVIRONMENT (90%); URBAN TRANSIT SYSTEMS (90%); EMISSIONS (89%); MOTORCOACHES & BUSES (89%); PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION (89%); ROAD TRANSPORTATION & TRANSIT FEES (89%); VEHICLE EMISSIONS (89%); VEHICLE TRAFFIC (77%); SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION (73%); MOTOR VEHICLES (72%)

Geographic: LONDON, ENGLAND (94%); MADRID, SPAIN (79%); ENGLAND (79%)

Load-Date: October 4, 2020

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